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HISTORY AROUND ST. JOHN'S WELL LANE

The Town's Ancient Hospitals

A CORRESPONDENT seeks information about the Brotherhood of St. John Baptist, which figures in the early history of Berkhamsted School. Another reader implores me to leave St. John's Well and its legends alone and tell the full story of the hospital of St. John, which occupied the Post Office site in medieval times.

With these marching orders I have been exploring some of the byways of local history. The tracks are not easy to follow, and obstacles are frequent, but on the way we find many an interesting fact.

Our story starts in early Norman times, when St. Mary's, Northchurch, appears to have served one very large parish. St. Peter's parish and church still belonged to the future. People living near the castle did not have to go all the way to St. Mary's to worship, however. Near the highway, beside a spring called St. James's Well, stood a parochial chapel dedicated to St. James, with its own burial ground.

ST. JAMES'S FAIR

No, James is not a misprint for John. The long-forgotten Norman chapel of St. James probably provides a clue to the choice of St. James's Day for the town's ancient fair, since in many places it was customary to hold the fair on the feast of the saint to whose honour the parish was dedicated. Our fair was not changed to St. Peter's Day when the "new" parish church was built 750 years, taking congregations away from the little chapel of St. James.

Geoffrey Fitz Piers, Earl of Essex, now enters upon the scene. He received the grant of the castle, and before he died in 1213 great things had happened in Berkhamsted. The building of St. Peter's Church was almost certainly in progress, and if Fitz Piers did not have a hand in that great work he was certainly deeply interested in, and perhaps the founder of, two hospitals in the town for sick and infirm persons, most of whom were lepers. One of the hospitals was dedicated to St. John Baptist, the other to St. John the Evangelist.

Moreover, a gild which probably existed in connection with St. James's Chapel is believed to have been continued by Fitz Piers as the Brotherhood

of St. John Baptist, a benevolent society of which we unfortunately know next to nothing. But almost certainly it had, in its early days at least, some connection with the hospital of St. John Baptist.

We are, I am afraid, working on some bare, disjointed bones of history, but the *Victoria History of Hertfordshire* helps us on our way with facts, clues and sound suppositions.

QUEEN ISABEL'S GIFTS

First, the Hospital of St. John Baptist. This, almost certainly, was the one which occupied the Post Office site. The first mention of it is in a charter of Fitz Piers, showing that the custody of the hospital had already been committed to the monastery of St. Thomas the Martyr of Acon, in London.

Queen Isabel, for the soul of her late husband, King John, confirmed the grant in 1216-7, adding that the hospital was to receive tithes of all her mills in Berkhamsted and Hemel Hempstead, 15 acres of land in "Selidone" and all the dike work with herbage between the fishpond and the hospital, the whole length of the fishpond, viz., from the road called Water Lane to the church of St. James, the land late of Roger the Cordwainer and another piece next the hospital, 15 cartloads of fuel in the "hay" of Berkhamsted and 25 loads in the wood of Brennendon (Bovingdon?), leaves to feed 20 pigs in the said "hay" and wood, and pannage and pasture for the hospital's cattle in the common pastures of Berkhamsted.

CONFUSING NAMES

Standing so near the old parochial chapel, St. John's was sometimes known as the hospital of St. James. Similarly, the famous well or spring was called either St. James's or St. John's Well, the latter surviving in the name of the lane to the watercress beds. There are also references to St. Leonard's Hospital, which may originally have been a separate institution but was apparently merged with the hospital of St. John Baptist. To add to the confusion, the name of the superior house in London, St. Thomas, was sometimes applied to

the two Berkhamsted hospitals of St. John.

And yet another name for the hospital of St. John Baptist: the Netherspital-house. We have a survivor of this name in Spital Meads, the meadows, now partly built upon, beside the Bulbourne.

Documents are few. One dated 1331, shows that the hospital chapel was rebuilt. By 1515-16 the last of the inmates had departed.

Now we move over to the Hospital of St. John the Evangelist. But where was it situated? As the Overspitalhouse it must have stood on higher ground, or farther up the Bulbourne valley. Like its near namesake, it was granted by Fitz Piers to the brothers of St. Thomas of Acon to supervise its goods and restrict its alms to the poor and sick of the hospital.

CORN AND "BACONES"

The master, brothers and sisters of the house received letters of protection from Henry III, who, in 1227, ordered the constable of Berkhamsted to supply the lepers of St. John's with 4 quarters of corn from the grange and two "bacones."

The canons of Acon did not have the right of appointing the master of St. John's; this apparently belonged to the owner of Berkhamsted. In 1336, when the honour was in the king's hands, he gave the custody of the hospital to one of his clerks, John de Rasen. In 1360 the Black Prince gave the wardenship to William Roket, chaplain. Eight years earlier the Black Prince ordered Roger le Graunt to deliver six beeches to "the hospital of St. Thomas at the end of the

town" for "the repair of the houses of the hospital."

The hospital was not used after 1515-16, when the Master of Acon entered into possession of the house and its property. The chapel seems to have been served for some time longer. In 1533, however, the place was made over to Thomas Jakes, of Berkhamsted, gentleman, who in 1536 disposed of a gilt chalice, a mass-book, three vestments and other ornaments. In 1539 the lead roof and bells of the chapel were sold.

THE BROTHERHOOD PRIEST

And what of the Brotherhood of St. John Baptist, founded by Fitz Piers? It was obviously a benevolent society rather than a trade gild, and still had its own priest early in the 16th century, for we find George Prior described as the "brotherhood priest." There was some dissension between this man and the rector of Berkhamsted, who complained to the Bishop of Lincoln that Prior was a common "baratur" and breaker of the King's peace. He was a "seeker of suspensyus and bawdy hawys" (seeker of suspicious and bawdy houses), "a pleyer at cardes and alle unlawfull gamys." Prior was summoned before the bishop at Woburn and bound over.

A 750 YEARS OLD LINK

I hope the brothers, if not the brotherhood priest, were above "suspensyion." In 1523 the inhabitants of Berkhamsted decided it was time to extend the usefulness of the fraternity by using its income for educational purposes. They had the good fortune to have John Incent as their president, and he presided over the dissolution of the old brotherhood in

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the best of good causes: "to ye finding of a School-master to teach there children and to ye building of a Schoole to teach in."

It is the appropriation of the lands of the Brotherhood of St. John Baptist, supplemented by Incent's gift of his own property, which links our most famous institution, Berkhamsted School, with a benevolent society which was founded before St. Peter's Church was built. Appropriately, St. John's and Incent's are the names of two school houses which are next-door neighbours in Chesham Road.

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